

FT View

Land database for development

SRI LANKA is preparing to carve out large tracts of land for development, but still does not have a database to monitor the allocations, increasing the danger for haphazard and mismanaged growth.

According to the Land and Land Development Minister, land allocation for development projects in the north and east will top 2,500 acres with the Government planning to reclaim 300,000 acres more from the rest of the country for various projects.

It has been reported that around 10,470 hectares (26,175 acres) of land in the North and East Provinces will be handed over for development work through the Government. This will include the investment zones that are being planned by the Government. Earlier the Cabinet had decided to establish an economic zone in Trincomalee and these plans are currently being finalised.

In addition the Government will also take steps to reclaim 300,000 acres of Government land that has been encroached on illegally by private parties. This land grabbing has occurred within the last five years. The Minister had remarked that encroachment of land was reducing the space available for development projects and that the Government would take steps to return them to the State.

Therefore, it is clear that a database to track land allocation in Sri Lanka has become a strong need, but thus far there hasn't been a concentrated effort to establish one. At present around 82% of land in Sri Lanka is owned by the Government, but there is no central record database to map the usage of the land, leading to misappropriation and encroachment. In order for development to happen in an ordered and transparent manner, a central database for land must be established.

At present when institutions such as the Economic Ministry refer a proposal to the Land Commission, it is cross-checked with the environmental and archaeological authorities and then land is released. However, since 1930 there have been many legal changes made and there is little clear idea on how State land is being used in the entire country.

Seeking a solution, the Information and Communication Technology Agency (ICTA) has launched a pilot project to assess the State land in the Western Province, which will later be extended to other parts of the country. If this project is successful, then a natural database will be created. The 'Bim Saviya' project launched by the Land Ministry is another attempt to catalogue State land. Since a land database has to evolve constantly it is a huge challenge, but this programme hopes to assess public land in 10 years – a huge challenge but one that is necessary.

There have already been accusations on how prime land at Galle Face has been illegally sold to the Shangri-la hotel project. Instances of hidden transactions, bribery and corruption are strongly linked with land allocation and it is extremely important for the Government to have a transparent process that covers the entire country so that chunks of land are not randomly signed out. Even ministries should declare their land sales in Parliament as the Constitution clearly states that public assets are under the purview of Parliament and not individual ministries. An organised allocation of land is the only way to prevent having chunks of the country sold illegally and preserve it for the future generations.



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It would be highly unlikely that the Sri Lankan Government would allow China to take advantage of the Port of Hambantota as a strategic staging point against India. No Government in power would allow China to threaten the security of India. This is inconceivable and it would never happen. The historic and cultural relations with India far transcend the political expediency of China's military strategies whether covert or overt

Rising China and the global impact

WITH a population as estimated by CIA at 1,330,044,605 (July 2008 estimated) and with a GDP growth rate at 9.7%, one would naturally pose a question as to the influence of China on the world map.

China boasts a literacy rate of 90% though official figures as to accessibility to internet are not available. As far as the US is concerned, it has a very high rate of accessibility to the internet. The entire US society is now logged on to the internet in one way or the other.

A life without internet in the US is unimaginable and any disruption of the free flow of information would pose grave political and commercial consequences. The entire US Government machinery functions on information technology. IT infrastructure is so crucial that it is linked to US Allies in Europe as well. The protection of IT infrastructure is of paramount importance.

Alarming development

China recently demonstrated that it has the ability to take on an ailing satellite and China was successful in destroying the satellite. This is an alarming development and had wider corollary for US National Security concerns.

Does China have the capacity to destroy US military satellites? Does the US have the ability to counter Chinese capacity to target US commercial and military satellites? These are vital US national security concerns.

Has the US ever conducted war games in the absence of a network of satellites? Almost all the war games hitherto conducted have been to test the effectiveness of plans and weapons and its high technological efficiency.

Never has there been a war game to prepare the US for a situation where there is a total breakdown of communications. Communications play a central role in governing a country and without it a military high command cannot function and it would put the entire country at risk.

Secret submarine base

There have been reports that China had constructed a secret submarine base in the Hainan Island primarily to counter US military presence in the Pacific. India too had expressed concern as the base is within the striking distance of Indian territory and India would be vulnerable to submarine-launched ballistic missiles. This is a clear manifestation of China's grand intentions in the region.

China is a secretive society unlike the US where public affairs are conducted every hour on the hour using high technology through mass media channels. Neither the US nor India could fathom the exact military capabilities of China. Neither country has the capability to penetrate the defence research being undertaken in China.



Guest Column

By Srinath Fernando

Does the Indian Naval Intelligence have the ability to account for all the Chinese naval and merchant fleet in the Indian Ocean? There have been reports that China is trying to encircle India using ports in Pakistan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

It would be highly unlikely that the Sri Lankan Government would allow China to take advantage of the Port of Hambantota as a strategic staging point against India. No Government in power would allow China to threaten the security of India. This is inconceivable and it would never happen. The historic and cultural relations with India far transcend the political expediency of China's military strategies whether covert or overt.

Chinese products

Chinese products keep penetrating markets worldwide at an alarming rate. The products range from footwear to machinery. Chinese construction companies have in the recent past made inroads into traditional markets receptive to US and European companies.

European designs have been extensively copied by Chinese entrepreneurs and it would be difficult for an unsuspecting individual to differentiate the Chinese product of original handcrafted quality footwear from a US or European product.

China has invested heavily in industrial espionage and Chinese nationals have been caught in the very acts of espionage. The Chinese domestic political landscape is so interwoven that people can be mobilised at will by the State, unlike in US, where civil and political rights have been guaranteed by the Constitution and conscription would be politically suicidal for the Government. The Chinese domestic political situation is a far cry from the US system and moulded on the needs of the military.

Chinese construction

Chinese construction companies have been awarded construction projects worldwide, especially in the Middle East region without weighing the pros and cons of engaging a construction company with a track record. In some cases cost aspects have taken precedence over quality and safety matters, thus rendering the project vulnerable to catastrophes.

The cost of engaging a Chinese company is much cheaper than employing a US company. A group of Chinese engineers could share a congested room at a construc-



Workers in a Chinese factory. Chinese products keep penetrating markets worldwide at an alarming rate. The products range from footwear to machinery

tion site whereas an American or a European engineer would require a fully furnished apartment with frequent travel to and from home base and also additional facilities such as family packages to compensate for working outside US territory. These factors keep US and European companies from competing with Chinese companies. This has been so due to societal norms in the US. But to counter rising China, the US needs a much more holistic approach that would encompass its traditional US allies and India in particular. The US must have a political dialogue with India as India is the only country that can be pitted against China. What the US should now be doing is empowering India and its people to face the reality before it is too late. It would be difficult for the US to deal with China given the current social, cultural and political considerations to mount a campaign to withstand rising China in about 20 years' time. The panacea for countering rising China should ideally be to:

- Launch a political dialogue with India taking advantage of its vibrant democracy.
- Assess the industrial and commercial opportunities in India vis-à-vis competition with Chinese products.
- Initiate an internationally accepted quality assurance/ quality control regime/ convention so that Chinese products will be required to comply with such international standards and this will enable the signatories to comply with the requirements of the convention with penalties for transgressions.
- Introduce a mechanism where-

by Chinese manufacturing could be subjected to international inspection for compliance.

- Invest heavily in the Indian domestic market for production of motor vehicles, machinery, and other hi-tech products solely for export markets so that it would deter Chinese products making inroads into markets traditionally receptive to US and European products.

- Empower Indian nationals taking advantage of its English speaking community and English must be delivered to every Indian with the assistance of the Government of India. A comprehensive educational programme should be undertaken to produce the leaders needed to achieve the results envisioned.

- Increase the level of cooperation between US and Indian academic institutions on advanced research.

- Introduce a joint patenting procedure for joint research.
- Introduce a holistic approach to bring Indian manufacturing standards in line with US standards (including higher education so that Indian engineers could be employed by US companies at a fraction of a cost of hiring a US engineer. This will enable US companies to mitigate the costs).

- Forge greater strategic cooperation with Indian defence establishments and on defence research.

- Invite India for participation in the Anti-Missile Defence shield.

(Srinath Fernando is a freelance journalist and a political lobbying and government relations consultant.)